

# INCOMPETENCIES OF THE PETER PRINCIPLE

*a questioning look at  
some of the contentions  
of the Peter Principle*

The incompetencies of the Peter Principle are so many and varied that a second book would barely do justice to the original work. For the uninformed, Dr Laurence J Peter and Raymond Hull recently wrote and published a book entitled, "The Peter Principle" <sup>1</sup>. The main theme of this humorous work is found on page 26

"In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence"

Prior to the formal introduction of this principle in the book, the authors make some rather all-inclusive and illogical statements such as, "Occupational incompetence is everywhere," <sup>2</sup> or "I saw that, sooner or later, this could happen to every employee in every hierarchy" <sup>3</sup>

Not content to describe past and present business and industrial formal structures (hierarchies) within the framework of this principle these two literary mesmerists ascribe this same principle to all recorded civilization—"my principle is the key to an understanding of all hierarchial systems, and therefore to an understanding of the whole structure of civilization" <sup>4</sup> Such an all pervasive statement, I for one cannot accept!

My own personal experiences and job role playing in such organized industrial work groups as industrial engineering, engineering, production foreman, personnel supervisor and training manager, as well as a sociology instructor have led me to believe that the authors are either naive in their exposure to human relations in industry, or they have unknowingly surrounded themselves with true incompetent personnel in their lifetimes and have assumed that *all* people who work are typical of their fictitious case histories

## THREE DIRECTIONS OF THOUGHT

The truly ingenious and subtle effect this book has on the reader is that it creates a tendency to mesmerize your thought processes in three distinct manners

First, as you acquire interest in the development of this principle you have the tendency to identify people you know or have known as a result of some

confrontation in a typical work situation As an example when I apply this basic principle to my own experiences, I can recall a former superior of mine who is presently the superintendent of a personnel services department and who perfectly fits the principle (At least in my mind) This sly silver fox gentleman reached this present level early in his career but never advanced beyond his present stage Quite conceivably he could have been a vice-president in a large urban corporation, but if I apply Peter's principle I deceive myself into believing that his failure to continue vertical mobility was due to the fact that he had reached his level of incompetency

This type of literary hypnosis may temporarily satisfy my injured and bruised ego as a result of being dismissed by this gentleman But if carried to extremes I may then try to rationalize my dismissal in my previous job on the fact that my former superior had reached his level of incompetency It's a self-deceiving poor elixir that these modern medicine men are dispensing to the reading public, because in reality, perhaps I was the one who had reached my level of incompetency!

As a result I did not want to admit my failings at the time of my dismissal, and now after reading Peter's principle, I have found "substantial proof" to what I had always believed (It wasn't my incompetency—it was his!) Such self-delusion or "beguiling synthesis" does not permit me to face the issue objectively!

Secondly, because we all have had many thousands of experiences with quasi-authoritarian rule as metered out by our "bosses" and perhaps mildly resent discipline and a conformity to the formal organizations with its rules, regulations, policies and procedures, we may smugly laugh to ourselves and agree in unison that "our boss" has definitely reached his own level of incompetency! Imagine our surprise when we learn a month later that our boss has just been promoted to a bigger job (because he is

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competent) and we may be our former boss's replacement!

Thirdly, as you relax your rational defenses through this identification association process by continued reading you sacrifice logical reasoning in a search for more real or imagined "characters." As an example—"In time, every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out its duties"<sup>5</sup> The word "every" implies that all training, formal and informal both inside and outside of the job, has been ineffective and of little consequence. Such is not the case in American industry today.

No where in the book could I find the words or case histories illustrating such employee qualities as dedication, drive or sacrifice.

I am sure we have known or presently know many people below us and above us who consistently exhibit these virtues daily in the performance of their jobs.

## STANDARDS

In Chapter Three, the authors write about "A Question of Standards." In discussing superior-subordinate evaluations they contend that the competent superior may evaluate his subordinate on performance or output, while the incompetent superior rates his subordinates on institutional values or input. The point they fail to make is the fact that many progressive industries and businesses annually appraise and evaluate all employees in the hierarchy for purposes of self-development. It is in this interrelationship that weaknesses (the super incompetents) and the strengths (the super competents) are unmasked and provisions made for guidance, counseling and training. Let's assume for the sake of the discussion that their principle is correct, but with the entrance of a progressive company who practices legitimate employee appraisals they therefore reduce a vast majority of the incompetency within their hierarchy. Reduction of incompetency in this case does not imply "headrolling," but rather a constructive approach towards the development and growth of their

employees. These companies realize that "people" (their employees) are their most important asset. In such cases incompetency is never eliminated, but its reduction is of significant proportions.

#### "DARWINIAN EXTENSION"

Finally, the authors outdo themselves in the creation of "The Darwinian Extension," an evolutionary theory "I would point out that, sooner or later, man must reach his level of life-incompetence"<sup>6</sup> In this area they cover everything from the invention of the wheel to space travel, which in essence, is the

result of man's reaching his level of incompetence through the various and sundry hierarchies he creates. If we accept this principle with its multitudinous variations and ramifications then perhaps we had better review our basic structure as a society and culture and reorganize the whole bit!

Finally, and in fairness to the authors, there is one statement with which I whole-heartedly agree "man cannot achieve his greatest fulfillment through seeking quantity for quantity's sake he will achieve it through improving the quality of life"<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, therefore, and with a good deal of levity, I wonder if the authors themselves have not reached their own level of incompetency in the creation of this work?

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Peter, Laurence J, and Hull, Raymond, *The Peter Principle*, William Morrow and Company, Inc , 1969
- 2 Ibid, p 20
- 3 Ibid, p 24
- 4 Ibid, p 26
- 5 Ibid, p 27
- 6 Ibid, p 156
- 7 Ibid, p 173

## ASTD INDIVIDUAL AWARDS PRESENTED AT CONFERENCE

Seven persons received ASTD's special individual awards in recognition of their outstanding contributions to the training and development profession, to the Society and to their communities. ASTD President Alphonse A Dobbs presented the awards during the Society's 1971 National Conference in New York City.

The persons receiving the awards are

C Hoyt Anderson, director, Office of Personnel Research and Recruitment, Ford Motor Company, Dearborn, Mich , for his contributions to national ASTD. This award recognizes particularly his assistance to the Society in the area of long range planning.

Sandra L Daddio, manager of support services, National Alliance of Businessmen, Pittsburgh, Pa , for public service. On "loan" from Gimbels Department Store where she is a research assistant, Miss Daddio is the nation's first female executive to be "loaned" from the business community to serve on a N A B metro staff. Her award recognizes her contributions to the Pittsburgh community through highly professional and innovative training programs.

Dugan Laird, management consultant, Decatur, Ga., for his contributions to the profession. He has provided leadership to ASTD in the areas of conference and institute design, international training and development, community devel-

opment programs and his monthly column in *Training in Business and Industry*.

James H Landree, vice president and director of personnel, Marine Corporation, Milwaukee, Wis , for research. As chairman of Wisconsin Chapter's Committee, he designed and conducted a study, "Profile of a Wisconsin Training Director," which describes the training director and his organization.

Felix M Lopez, Jr , president, Felix M Lopez & Associates, Roslyn, N Y , and adjunct professor, Roth Graduate School of Business Administration, Long Island University, for his publications. Dr Lopez has written several significant articles and books, including *The Making of a Manager*, published by the American Management Association.

Althea T L Simmons, national director for training programs, NAACP, New York, N Y , for her contributions to the training and development profession. She has provided leadership in planning ASTD's 1971 National Conference and has worked in behalf of women trainers on ASTD's Women's Caucus.

Robert H. Wilson, training advisor, Office of Labor Affairs, Agency for International Development, U S Department of State, Washington, D C , for service to ASTD. Through Mr Wilson's work, ASTD is currently deeply involved in the development of national training organizations in developing countries.